



Malawi

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were tensions between Christians and Muslims during the period covered by this report.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 45,747 square miles, and its population is approximately 11 million. More than 70 percent of the population is Christian. Among the Christian denominations, the largest are the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), with smaller numbers of Anglicans, Baptists, evangelicals, and Seventh-day Adventists. There is a substantial Muslim minority totaling approximately 20 percent of the population. The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni, adhering to either the Qadriya or Sukutu groups. There are also Hindus, Baha'is, a small number of Rastafarians, and followers of traditional indigenous religions. There are few atheists.

Foreign missionary groups are present in the country, including Protestants, Catholics, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Islamic aid organizations.

Regional voting trends and political affiliation sometimes reflect the concentration of faiths in certain regions of the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion.

There are no separate requirements for the recognition of religions, but religious groups must register with the Government. A religious group must submit documentation detailing the structure and mission of its organization along with a nominal fee for review by the Ministry of Justice. Once approved, a religious group registers formally with the Registrar General's Office in Blantyre. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports that the Government refused to register any religious groups.

The Government observes both Christian and Muslim holy days. Public holidays in the country include Eid al-Fitr, Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

Foreign missionaries experienced occasional delays in renewing employment permits. This appeared to be the result of bureaucratic inefficiency rather than a deliberate government policy against foreign missionaries. Missionaries and charitable workers paid lower fees for employment permits than did other professionals.

The President, Bingu wa Mutharika, is Catholic and the Vice President is Muslim. Several cabinet members and parliamentarians are Muslim. President Mutharika regularly sends official regards to members of all faiths in the country on appropriate religious holidays.

As a result of previous debate, many public schools offer a course entitled "Bible Knowledge," which is Christian oriented, and another entitled "Moral and Religious Education," which includes Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, and Christian material.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

In May 2005, the Government and Rastafarian leaders came into conflict over a ban on long hair in public schools. The Rastafarian community, citing long dreadlocks as an expression of religion, called the ban discriminatory and threatened legal action. Government officials declared the prohibition was against long hair, not dreadlocks, and was not intended to infringe upon any religious rights.

Religious leaders were free to speak publicly on political and social issues.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were occasional tensions between Christians and Muslims. Although there were no significant conflicts, these minor tensions were especially evident following the presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2004, and they appeared to have been fueled largely by political candidates. Christians and Muslims generally coexist peacefully, often participating in business or civil-service organizations together. A small Hindu minority also participated in business and civil society.

In November 2004, a dispute between Muslims and Christians erupted over the proper burial rites for mixed-religion families. Following the death of a child whose Christian parents hailed from a Muslim-dominated community, religious leaders and relatives on both sides advocated for their views on burial rites. The dispute allegedly resulted in violence and vandalism after a series of inflammatory remarks. A Christian preacher was allegedly assaulted in the incident, and in May, several suspects were in custody awaiting trial for assault and malicious damage.

During the 2004 presidential and parliamentary campaign, some prominent Christian religious leaders frequently spoke about corruption, the electoral process, and the candidates. The church leaders were often openly critical of the ruling political party, and candidates and officials took issue with the churches' statements. The Government did not attempt to restrict remarks of religious leaders; however it declared that such statements deviated from the proper role of religious leaders. Churches continued to be a significant source of political influence, particularly in rural areas.

In December 2004, a group of Muslims in Blantyre allegedly beat a Christian preacher for refusing to hand over a copy of the Qur'an. The preacher did not suffer serious injuries. No arrests were reported, and no further action was taken on the case during the reporting period.

At the end of the period covered by this report, the key instigators of the June 2003 riots following the deportation of five alleged Al-Qa'ida members had not gone to trial, although the cases were turned over to the Director of Public Prosecution. Tensions have since decreased and no further conflict has occurred, although some Muslim groups have continued to criticize publicly the Government's actions.

Political and community leaders have made active efforts to foster cooperation among religious groups. For example, in 2004, presidential and parliamentary candidates of various religious backgrounds attended a series of "Presidential Prayer Breakfasts" organized by a Christian group. Other invited guests included Muslim leaders, the diplomatic community, and civil society leaders.

The Public Affairs Committee (PAC), a nonprofit and politically unaligned local organization, was involved prominently in promoting civic education and human rights and was also active in monitoring the 2004 electoral process. PAC included representatives of various churches and mosques.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials maintained frequent contact with leaders and members of all religious communities in the country.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy continued to promote religious tolerance through grants, meetings, exchange programs, and the distribution of reading materials. On several occasions, Embassy officials appeared on local radio programs to discuss issues of religious freedom and tolerance. In November 2004 and February 2005, an Embassy representative was interviewed and took calls from the public on a Radio Islam program.

Two Muslim journalists from Radio Islam and The Daily Times newspaper traveled to the U.S. in October 2004 on a U.S. Government-sponsored reporting tour concerning religious freedom in America. Upon returning to the country, the two published positive accounts of their experiences.

In September 2004, the Embassy sponsored a local Muslim group's project to encourage civic education and participation among rural people of all faiths.

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